VERSES

MARY WRIGHT PLUMMER

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VERSES

BY

MARY WRIGHT PLUMMER

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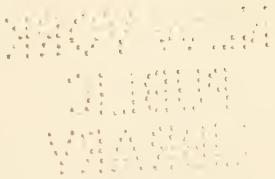

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IN 1896 an edition of three hundred copies of Miss Plummer's "Verses" was printed, mainly for private distribution. The little book has long been out of print; and this new edition is issued in response to requests made since the author's death in September, 1916. The earlier volume contained fifteen poems. These are reprinted here, with four which were written later.

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"THE WIND-SWEPT MULTITUDE IN THE INFERNO"

EVER we drift, drift,
Swept by a wind we resist not,
Whirling and turning swift;
Onward we drift, drift,
Blown through the cloud and the rift,
Whither we know not and list not.

Hark to the curses that tear
Their way through the rush of the air!
Love that was uncontrolled,
Killed by the ceaseless cold,
Holds like a weight in its arms the price of the heaven it sold,
Daring its voice to lift,
Cursing the fatal gift,
Winding in closer folds as onward we circle swift.

Ages and ages past,
Passion-enthralled at last,

Lovers were drawn and held and borne by this bitter blast;
Yet and for ages unnumbered the strong
Pitiless current shall bear them along,
Driving with senseless force
All that resist or resist not,
Holding its changeless course
Whither they know not and list not.

Aching or sting of pain,
These we have begged in vain,
Only to dull the thoughts keen-edgèd that cut the brain.
Fools to beg of a mindless wind!
Fools to hope that a sin once sinned
May ever be cast behind, —
Forgot in our endless race, —
When at every turn we see it lined
In the look of a pallid face,
As we whirl and cling and eddy and drift,
Through cloud and rift,
Swift, more swift —
Whither to know it avails not:
Blown by a tempest that fails not,
Ever we drift, drift.

1882

IRREVOCABLE

WHAT thou hast done thou hast done: for the
heavenly horses are swift;
Think not their flight to o'ertake — they stand at the
throne even now.
Ere thou canst compass the thought, the immortals in
just hands shall lift,
Poise, and weigh surely thy deed, and its weight shall be
laid on thy brow;
For what thou hast done thou hast done.

What thou hast not done remains; and the heavenly
horses are kind:
Till thou hast pondered thy choice they will patiently
wait at thy door.
Do a brave deed, and behold! they are farther away
than the wind;
Returning, they bring thee a crown to shine on thy brow
evermore;
For what thou hast done thou hast done.

1882

THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

THE right divine! What king that hath it not? —
The right to look through all his realm and see
What fever courses in the people's veins,
And lay thereon the balm of kingly hands;
To turn aside the treasonable blade,
And make a friend of him who carries it;
To bind up public wounds; to put away
The screens wherewith men hide accusing truth,
And speak grave words when these befit the time;
To sow the land so full of happiness,
Of peace and justice, love and courtesy,
That ships bound seaward unto fabled shores
Shall never tempt his people otherwhere.
Such right divine as this hath every king.

The Atlantic Monthly
May, 1882

"AND ENOCH WALKED WITH GOD"

O THOU who in time's morning walked with God,
Nor heeded that the world paths crossed thine own,
Who, listening to the music shed abroad
By that one Voice, heard not the other's tone
Mocking at him who walked, or seemed to walk, alone,

Tell us, who long to know, what converse sweet
Fell from your lips? what troubled questions lay
Answered and clear, ere thou couldst frame them meet,
In that bright light of Truth, the perfect day,
Where vexèd problems smooth and solve themselves away?

Didst know what field-flowers fluttered 'neath the hem
Of thy long garment, or what birds of song
Circled around thee, or what light wind came
Lifting thy locks the while ye walked along,
Seen and unseen, the marveling world among?

Vain questioning! for answer as thou mightst,
Our ears are holden that we cannot hear;
The soul that walks with God upon the heights
Hath secrets voiceless to the alien ear.
To him that is of God the things of God are clear.

Unity
1883

MY OWN

BROWN heads and gold around my knee
Dispute in eager play;
Sweet, childish voices in my ear
Are sounding all the day;
Yet sometimes in a sudden hush
I seem to hear a tone
Such as my little boy's had been,
If I had kept my own.

And ofttimes when they come to me
As evening hours grow long,
And beg me, winningly, to give
A story or a song,
I see a pair of star-bright eyes
Among the others shine —
The eyes of him who ne'er hath heard
Story or song of mine.

At night, I go my round and pause
Each white-draped cot beside,
And note how flushed is this one's cheek,
How that one's curls lie wide;

And to a corner tenantless
  My swift thoughts go apace —
That would have been, if he had lived,
  My other darling's place.

The years go fast; my children soon
  Within the world of men
Will find their work, and venture forth
  Not to return again;
But there is one who cannot go, —
  I shall not be alone, —
The little one who did not live
  Will always be my own.

The Century Magazine
March, 1882

LIFE

LIFE, we, thy children, cling about thy knees
And pray for largess; some are babes that turn
Sweet faces, sure of answer, yet to learn
That suns may shine and they be left to freeze;
And some cast fiercely at thee words that burn,
Or all thy steps with bitter 'plainings tease;
And some, grown mute from many unheard pleas,
Go from thee, looking back with eyes that yearn.
What charm is in unmotherly caprice
That, rather than be led to endless peace,
We court, on bended knee, thy constant frown —
Ay, even invite the smiting of thy hand,
So we stay with thee? Shall we understand
When thou hast loosed our fingers from thy gown?

Magazine of Poetry
1889

MUSIC

WHEN in the shadow of the twilight room
We sit together, opening each to each
Our stores of hope, our depths of unbelief,
And comfort comes with speech, until the soul
Lays warning finger upon eager lip
And we are silent, trusting not to words
The very innermost, — then come the tones
Of masters who have voiced in other years
All we would say of longing and of trust;
Softly the notes lead heart to heart, and blend
Into one chord of effort triumphing
The weakness of our spirits. When the lights
Come glimmering in, eyes turn to questioning eyes
And read the secret music has betrayed.

1888

OLD AGE

NOW is he come unto that countryside
Past the last outpost. Here Life loosely reigns,
Asking no tribute from the deadened plains
Where stealthy mists creep from the rising tide.
If there be fellow-travelers in this vast,
Scarcely he knoweth. Voices that he hears
Sound far away and strange unto his ears,
Commingled with the echoes from the past.
He hath outstripped the mirage of his prime
Long since; and journeying on to dip his hand
Into Truth's fountain, he hath come to know
Truth for the chiefest mirage. On the sand
Lappeth the river at the bounds of Time.
His dull ear listens; — must it, then, be so?

1890

PRAYERS FOR THE LIVING

O SOUL of all souls whitest, what needst thou
Of solemn masses who with angel choirs
Dost chant enraptured thy most pure desires,
And to the heavenly will, as erst on earth, dost bow?
What can I ask for thee, in halting prayers
Heavy with grief, that could increase thy bliss?
What in thy perfectness can be amiss
Who grewest to angelhood all unawares?
Rather pray thou for me. And when ye stand,
Making petition, folding wing on wing,
Drooping your eyes before the glory-light,
Think if thou mayst on him who, wandering
Along the lower way, hath lost thy hand,
Yet seeketh for thy footprints day and night.

1890

THE TWO NATURES

WHERE hast thou been, O Soul, in thy sojourning
Out of the body? on what high emprise,
What noble quest, that thus to me returning
I labor at my anchor, fain to rise?
What king hath entertained thee, condescending
To share his plenty with thy low estate?
Why turn away from so divine befriending,
To keep thy faith with me inviolate?

Nay, chide me not, and strive not with me longer;
Breathe thou alone the air thou lovest best.
Some day, perhaps, thy loyal wings grown stronger,
Thou mayst with hope disturb me where I rest.
Now through thy ether shouldst thou lead me, breathless,
To that high Presence where thy name is known,
Into that circle heaven-born and deathless,
How should I shame thee, stained and earthy grown!

Sad is thy mien, ay, even unto weeping. —
Car'st thou so much? Are we so firmly one?
Lift me again from out this deadly sleeping;
Help me to raise mine eyes unto the sun.

Yea, where thou soarest I will follow after —
  Far, far below, yet always in thy wake;
Should I sink back, remember it hereafter,
  Thus have I striven, and striven for thy sake.

1892

NATURE

THOU, Nemesis, whom the old Greeks did name
Sternest of all who claimed their vow and prayer,
Pleased by no gifts, choosing thine altars bare
Till he who gave should cleanse himself from blame,
Thou ceased pursuit when restitution came,
And turned thine eyes' grave searching otherwhere,
While the light-bosomed wretch, free of thy care,
Felt his heart leap with joy no past could tame.
But we of our day own a bitterer fate, —
(Who would not justice, even if justice slay?) —
For scarce man knoweth if he violate
Our goddess' bidding till her reckoning-day;
Then slowly he perceiveth his estate:
Not he alone, but heirs unborn must pay.

1891

DISILLUSION

MORNING

COME, Sweet, the world is wide; so, hand in hand,
Let us fare forth to win our victories.
Thou shalt be queen of beauty and of love,
As in the old bright days of tournament;
And I will wear thy colors in my heart,
And on my brow the seal invisible
Of thy true kiss: so shall before me fall
All shapes of evil that infest the light.
And when the jousts are ended, and the games,
Thou shalt sit proudly upright in thy place,
And while the world is wondering, all agaze,
Lo, at thy feet my garlands shall be laid. —
For half my strength is thine, being come from thee
And that sweet faith that armors me anew.

EVENING

The days are short'ning. Wilt forgive me, heart,
For the long turmoil I have led thee through
And to no end? I meant it otherwise;
But one right arm is weak against the world.
Here on thy shoulder let me rest my head,
My weary head that aches from life's long din;
And in thy comforting let me forget
The disappointment, and the hidden foe,
And all that made my days a vulgar strife,
Unheralded, untrumpeted, uncrowned.
My strength is weak beside thy steadfastness,
And there takes refuge. If thou cherish it,
Then to have failed and yet to win thy smile,
Ah, love, is victory beyond desert.

Scribner's Magazine
August, 1887

INHERITANCE

O LITTLE child, through what long leagues of pain
Tendeth thy life, if our God will it so!
Through what deprivement of the heat and glow
That wait on action, and are counted gain!
How by thy couch the dull hours stretch their length
That slip like molten silver through the hands
Able to answer to the world's demands,
Giving it all their skilfulness and strength!
God solve this problem for us! When a soul,
A little soul, of Thine own essence pure,
Waiteth, expectant, for the earthly frame
In which it would do service, true and sure,
Why should a past obscure, beyond control,
Clothe it with suffering? Is Thy law to blame?

1890

THE BIRTHDAY IN HEAVEN

WHAT will they bring thee, Sweet, to-morrow's dawn —
Our three-year-old, whose birthday is in heaven?
For the earth-happiness thou hast foregone
What will they do to make the balance even?
Do the grave angels love as mothers love?
And is there one, just one from all the rest,
Whose arms were first to cradle thee above,
To whom thou turnest, whom thou lovest best?

Yea, surely mother-hearts in heaven must beat,
Else 't were not heaven, and God were God no more; —
Could He be happy in His holy seat
If any child stood, homesick, near the door?
Tell that dear angel that doth keep our child
To hold thee close to-morrow, and to press
Upon thy brow grown radiantly mild
All that we would of lingering caress.

Tell her on earth we brought thee toys and flowers,
And told thee stories when thy birthday came;

Say to her that when thou wast wholly ours
With love unspeakable we called thy name;
And when the shadows fell, — rememberest thou? —
How thou didst nestle down in sheltered sleep!
Who sings to thee? Whose arms enfold thee now?
To whom has God my jewel given to keep?

Be not unhappy, Sweet. Enjoy her care;
Go to her first of all the heavenly host;
But, oh, do not forget me, is my prayer!
I am thy mother; — love me still the most.

1890

THE DEATH OF CÆSAR

CICERO'S SOLILOQUY

AY, look, and look again, at him who bore
The world and flinched not, but an hour ago.
In his colossal shadow yours was lost:
"Down with him, down, that we may see ourselves!"
He lies there; — are ye greater than before?
Beyond the door the world he carried waits
To fall upon your staggering feebleness
And loosen into chaos once again.
Flee ye, indeed! From that still figure prone
Stretches a shadow that may well affray.
Living, it alternated with the sun;
Dead, it creeps onward, licking up the light.
So have ye chilled the pulses of the world
Into stagnation. Flee, and be content!

1895

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

THY chosen people, Lord! Aye, and for what?
Chosen to bear the world's contempt and scorn;
Chosen to cringe and fawn, contrive and plot,
Only to win the right to live, being born;
Chosen to bow the neck and bend the knee,
To hold the tongue when other tongues revile,
To bear the burdens, bond-slaves e'en when free;
Give cheerfully, be spit upon and smile;
Chosen for death, for torture and the screws,
While the slow centuries move, they say, toward light!
Lord, from the horrors of this endless night
Let us go free! — another people choose!

New York Times
November 24, 1905

THE CONQUEST OF THE AIR

ANOTHER world we have, we that have made
Desert and pit and battlefield of earth,
Ravished her treasures, brought from riches dearth,
Stifled her fountains, plucked away her shade;

We that have poisoned with the cities' reek
All her fair rivers, stol'n the cataract's flow,
Trampled in greed her helpless ones and low,
And in bloodthirstiness have slain her weak.

Now, in our grasp almost, Thy wind and cloud,
Thy winged fugitives, Thy snow and rain,
Sunbeam and starbeam, yea, Thy lightnings proud,
We have stretched out our hand for, not in vain.
Seeing what desolation we have made
Of Thy first gift — Lord, art Thou not afraid?

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New York Times
September 16, 1908

LOST CHILDREN

O THOU, whose mother sought in vain
A shelter once, at Christmastide,
And so with kindly beasts was fain
To beg the rest elsewhere denied.
Do Thou, from terrors safe long since,
Remember in Thy feet the prints,
And in Thy hands the nail,
Look where the little children stray,
Roofless and cold, this Christmas Day,
Unknowing why they ail.

Thou hadst Thy mother — on her breast
In safety warm and soft didst lie,
Nourished wast Thou, and to Thy rest
Wast soothed then by her lullaby.
See Thou how these are scatterèd,
Parents and friends, to seeming, fled,
The world a stranger place;
So sad, how can their angels brook
Upon these little ones to look
And then behold His face?

Again, as once in Palestine,
  Let men bring gifts from near and far —
Again, above the hovel mean,
  See clear, as they, the guiding star.
May hearts, grown over-wise and cold,
Bring myrrh and frankincense and gold
  To deck the humble stall;
And make Thou us, for one child's sake,
Wherever lost young hearts do ache,
  Fathers and mothers all!

New York Times
December 20, 1914

REQUIEM

WHAT is this drawing, drawing, — soft and strong
As it would clasp me to a sheltering breast?
What is this rhythmic pulsing, faint and long,
As it would chant me to a place of rest?
What is this gentle loosening of my hold
On all the treasures gathered through the years?
What is this radiance of pearl and gold
Shining and glowing through a mist of fears?
What is this turning of my eyelids, slow,
As they would rest upon some light afar?
What is this greeting, greeting sweet and low,
Wherein at last no sounds of parting are?
Whose is the welcoming face that bids me come?
Thou? Is it Thou, O Lord? Then this is Home!

August, 1909

CENTRAL CIRCULATION
CHILDREN'S ROOM